DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 311 123 UD 027 025

TITLE	The Consumers' Perspective: At-Risk Youth Talk about Programs.
INSTITUTION	Public/Private Ventures, Philadelphia, PA.
SPONS AGENCY	Mott (C.S.) Foundation, Flint, Mich.
PUB DATE	89
NOTE	17p.; For the full report, see ED 300 486.
AVAILABLE FROM	Public/Private Ventures, Communications Department, 399 Market Street, Philadelphia, PA 19106.
PUB TYPE	Reports - General (140) -- Information Analyses (070)
EDRS PRICE	MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	*Dropout Attitudes; *Dropout Prevention; Dropout Programs; Dropouts; *High Risk Students; *Motivation; *Persistence; Personal Narratives; *Remedial Programs; School Holding Power; Secondary Education; Youth Programs
IDENTIFIERS	*Youth Conservation Corps

ABSTRACT

This document summarizes the findings of a study of the reasons why some at-risk youth persist in special programs while others drop out. Information was gathered from 16 focus group sessions comprised of both "persisters" and "leavers" from in-school remedial programs and out-of-school youth service corps. The findings, presented in the youths' own words, are as follows: (1) complaints about programs were similar for both groups and included tedium, unmet expectations, and problems with staff or peers; (2) persisters decided to stay on the basis of social bonds, parental influence, staff influence, personal determination, future expectations, and satisfaction with the program; (3) leavers found some positive aspects to their programs and gave clear messages to program staff that they were considering dropping out; and (4) leavers decided to drop out based on extrinsic and program-related reasons. Recommendations for practitioners include the following: (1) incentives and counseling are needed during the initial phase of a program when youth are most vulnerable to attrition; (2) monetary rewards and positive learning experiences were most frequently cited as incentives; (3) a relationship with a teacher or supervisor, or the team spirit in a class or group, was most frequently cited as the most positive aspect of participation; (4) complaints should be regarded as opportunities for staff intervention; and (5) leavers may play a positive role for those who persist. (FMW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

PPV

ED311123

The Consumers' Perspective

At Risk Youth Talk About Programs

UD 027 025

Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

N. Jaffe
Public/Private Ventures

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Many youth at risk of failure in school or the labor market benefit from social programs designed for them. Many others drop out. Yet little is known about how youth make the decision to leave or to stay.

From the perspective of program planners and funders, high attrition extracts a heavy price: it raises costs, lowers performance averages and makes programs appear to be "creaming" more manageable youth from a target group while failing to help those most in need. From the perspective of practitioners, who struggle to identify youth who need services and seem likely to benefit from them, high attrition rates frustrate the achievement of project goals.

But what about the youth's–the consumers'– perspective? To find out, P/PV asked them, in 16 focus group sessions in which the youth were encouraged to talk about their program experiences. The groups consisted of "leavers" and "persisters" from in-school remedial programs and out-of-school youth service corps. Sessions were led by a psychologist and audiotaped for analysis. P/PV published a full report on the process and results of this research in Summer 1988. That report, and the development and publication of this pamphlet, were made possible by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation.*

This pamphlet is a digest of the research findings–presented in the youth's own words–and should be of particular interest to program planners, operators and youth workers. The young people's reportage reminds us of the enormous differences among individuals and the difficulty of categorizing their behavior on the basis of what they say: the persisters and the leavers sound very much alike. Both groups complain about the programs in which they were enrolled. Persisters report that they frequently thought of leaving, while leavers say they thought about staying many times–and finally quit for reasons that vary widely.

As a result, the report raises many more questions than it answers. However, it takes us one step toward understanding what the youth's messages mean–a challenge to the designers and operators of programs for at-risk youth.

The voices of the persisters and leavers are often remarkably similar. Throughout the text, the persisters' quotes are in a roman type and the leavers' quotes are in *bold italic* type.

**The report Youth Motivation: At-Risk Youth Talk to Program Planners is available from Public/Private Ventures, Communications Department, 399 Market Street, Philadelphia, PA 19106.*

Complaining About Programs:
Leavers and Persisters Sound Alike

At some point in a program, almost every participant thinks about leaving–regardless of whether he or she actually does leave. In fact, persisters and leavers sound very much alike when discussing the misgivings and frustrations they have experienced. Their complaints are of tedium, disappointment with the program, problems with staff or peers, or just general dissatisfaction. Everyone complains, and persisters appear to complain the loudest.

Tedium
"it felt like it was forever"

"I knew we had to work and all, but I thought it was gonna be more fun – more activities going on, more class discussions. But at first he just had us working, writing. Every day we'd come in there . . . we had to do this and this."

"The same thing over and over again, like the work sheets."

"It felt like they was using you because you didn't get your money until later on. It got boring and felt like it was forever."

"The teacher would give long lectures."

"We never moved out of that room. We had to be there, work with the same teacher every day for nine weeks."

"It was okay at the beginning, but a lot of the things that we did repeated itself."

"I took a boring job. I was lifting rocks. He said landscaping, so I thought it would be easy."

Disappointed expectations

"They pumped you up, but..."

"I wanted to quit when they told us we had to go to summer school . . . Summer school is for people who didn't pass their classes. They didn't tell us [at first] that we had to go to summer school."

"They made you expect so much that once you got there it wasn't what you expected, so you felt let down. They pumped you up, but once you got there it wasn't half of what you thought."

"I would hope that the next students will get exactly what they're saying. They shouldn't even mention the money they're going to give them until they know for sure."

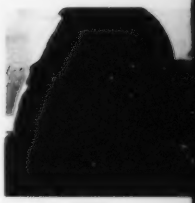
"They should explain it more. If your idea in your head is different from theirs, then you're going to be discouraged and disappointed."

Problems with staff or peers

"I couldn't get along"

"I had got into a fight with a girl in the program, and you know, I couldn't get along no matter what I did. If we tried to make friends, it wouldn't work . . . so that's when I wanted to quit and just leave everything."

"They treated you like dirt kind of. Because it was a low-income program, they'd snap at you. They'd use you because they knew you wanted to be paid."



"Stress, pressure, the job, no communication. You try to tell something to someone and they're not even listening to you. . . You put in the effort and you don't get it back."

"Sometimes he'd (the teacher) like start raising his voice at me, and I didn't even do nothin' and it makes me mad. He would get on my case."

"I was trying to get on her (the teacher's) nerves. She was getting on mine and I wanted to let her have it."

General griping

"You get pissed off"

"Too much work and not enough reward."

"You didn't learn anything. It was a waste of my time, I could have been somewhere else."

"You get pissed off at work and you think about how little you're making . . .The miserable conditions is what really screws me around."

"The work they gave you...it was too easy. It was like, don't bring this to me, I'm in 11th grade."

"I wake up every day, I see the same faces, I hear the same complaints..."

"In the corps, you're guilty until proven innocent."

[redacted]

Making the Decision:
Why Persisters Stay

Most persisters at some time considered quitting. A decision to stay usually reflects a weighing of the pros and cons of continuing in the program. Reasons why persisters decide to stay fall into several broad categories.

[redacted]

Social bonds
"It was like a family"

"My friends."

"It was like a family, you could say anything you wanted."

"After the first week and a half, it kinda got fun, you got to know each other."

"I wanted to finish up what I started. Not waste it all. Now I have a lot of friends . . . that I didn't want to leave, that I want to graduate with in June."

Parental Influence

"my Mom said..."

"My mother. My mother says 'that's a good program, you should be in it, you shouldn't leave. If you don't like it by June we'll talk about it.'"

"My mom, she told me that if I really wanted to get out of the program that I could. But she said there's a lot of other kids that wish they could be in that program and it made me think, so I just stayed in."

"I know but I don't know. Because I got sick of the lady calling and I was at the point I was going to leave, and my mom said I should just stay, ain't gonna to be doing nothin' else."

Staff Influence

"there's support here"

"I find that there's support here. You have your team leader, you have everyone who knows you at the office. And I find that I have a little more confidence in myself approaching strangers."

"'Cause they keep saying it's gonna get different, it's gonna get better."

"We had evaluation sheets with our grades and the teacher gave comments on what we should do...and she encouraged me."

"They wanted you to really realize that they meant that, you know, you got something, and they see it and they want to bring it out."

"The first time I got there I used to have a lot of problems and when I told my teacher, to help me, she wasted her time on me."

Determination
"something I'm proving to myself"

"I stayed in because I want to show my family, of course, that I'm gonna make it."

"I stayed because I want to prove to myself and to the other people that say I can't do it that I can do it."

"Just to go through with it, to be able to do it. I ain't ever stayed with anything. I give up."

"That's the challenge, just to stay with it, you can tolerate it, see how long you can last when it seems to be getting worse."

"Because it's something I'm proving to myself. I dropped out of college prep school. I quit this, I quit that because it wasn't my choice. This is something I can say to myself, I joined that shitty program and I completed it."

"In my life, I've given up on so many things and this time it's something that I don't want to give up, something I'm proving to myself. I'm going to make it through."

Looking toward the future
"I'm getting something out of it"

"I'm going to college. This was something to put on my record."

"I thought about leaving because sometimes it got really boring in the classroom. I thought about leaving, but then I decided you can't leave because you need the credit."

"What changed my mind was my grades. My grades were okay, but I wanted them higher. It's like I tried to forget about what [the teacher] said and just go ahead."

"I'm getting something out of it. Plus, I'm going to school at night now . . . As long as I'm getting something out of it, I'll stay."

Satisfactions with the program
"I feel lucky . . ."

"The money. The second [reason] was I was getting more hours on my job."

"It's a job where you can work. You see other people, they ain't got no job, they trying to get a job, so I feel lucky that I got a job, I'm working."

"All my friends was working, and there wasn't nothing to do at the house. They all had money and could go shopping in the weekend, but every other weekend you don't have nothin', you have to depend on your mom. I wanted to work."

Before the Decision:
What Leavers Say

Leavers, too, talk about the things they like about programs and sound very much like persisters when they do. Often, they also indicate that their decision to leave was a long time in coming. Most leavers have indicated to program staff that they are dissatisfied and thinking of leaving well before the time of departure.

The positives
"it was looking kinda right..."

"I stayed because there was people here that I got along with."

"I stayed because I was 15 years old and I knew I couldn't get no job, and this was good, the money."

"I stayed because I didn't want to lose the job, even though it wasn't much money. Still it was something. Then I didn't want to go back to that class because I couldn't stand the teacher. So I just stayed."

"I got one check, and it was looking kinda right, to have some money for a change. That's the only reason why I stayed."

Danger signals

"I told them what was going on"

"When I got into an argument with the teacher after school , I told her I'd leave because the class is not really living up to what it said it would."

"A situation with my supervisor, I wanted to leave. I was outside, I hate dirty work like that. I wanted another job . . . but I decided to wait."

"I was out of my house . . . I was going to leave [the program] 'cause I wasn't gonna be going to school anymore anyway. But then I talked to the teachers, and I told them what was going on and they said that, for me to still go . . . So I just stayed."

"I wish I could have talked to them and explained it to them, more calmly, made myself look better, but since he had this little attitude, I said forget it."

"It was like, you're going along, you're hearing all this, it's frustrating, you're building up and then one thing finally breaks it. You say 'I'm out of here.'"

Making the Decision:
Why Leavers Leave

Youth's reasons for leaving fall into two broad categories: reasons extrinsic to a program, such as school transfers, pregnancies, or family relocations; and program-related reasons that vary with the individual, who usually expresses them in very personal terms.

Extrinsic reasons
"then I moved..."

"I was thinking about leaving school but I liked [the program] so I just stayed till this year. When I found out I wasn't getting my credit to graduate, then I moved to another school."

"I started going, but when my baby was too little, I wanted to stay home. I didn't trust no one to watch him."

"They wanted you to go for the whole summer, and I was going out of town for the whole summer."

Program-related reasons
"it didn't do anything for me..."

"It was just too long for me. It was okay at the beginning but then it got too long."

"First teacher's okay; then the second teacher, she started gettin' on my nerves, so she didn't do much, just show us and go about our business. I didn't think that was fair. She used to be in a correctional center . . . so I guess she thought she was still there . . . she demanded you do it her way."

"The money. They only pay us $30 a week. I make that in a day."

"It wasn't the class that I thought I needed for the future. I thought that class would help me, but it didn't do anything for me in any kind of way."

"Little by little, our team was breaking up, and I had so much school and too much pressure to stand this bull."

"I can't relate to the team leader because he would talk over your head, not to your level."

"It's just not me. Can't get into it, can't get involved."

Notes for Practitioners

Listening carefully to all these voices raises many questions for practitioners eager to be responsive to participants' needs and keep them in a program long enough to benefit from it. Do the complaints identify real program faults that deserve criticism, or do they only ventilate the stress young people experience in coming to terms with a program's demands? When they gripe specifically about staff, are the participants merely describing a communication failure or are they also emphasizing the importance to them of an empathic, supportive teacher and role model?

The voices do seem to send a coherent message in several areas:

- Youth's reports on their adjustment to programs strongly suggest that they are especially vulnerable to attrition during the initial phase of program participation, often because of differences between their expectations and program reality. Incentives for persistence early in the program and discussions that temper expectations might help stem these early departures.
- The most frequently cited incentives to persist are monetary rewards and positive learning experiences on the job or in the classroom.
- A relationship with a teacher or supervisor, or the team spirit within a group or class, is often mentioned as the most positive aspect of participation.
- Few leavers depart impulsively. Many frustrations and failures–frequently reported to program staff–precede the decision to leave. Thus, youth's complaints may flag for staff an opportunity to intervene and promote retention.
- Leavers may play a positive role for youth who remain. Persisters often refer to them scornfully: "They can't handle it," "They don't want what they're going to get." In so doing, they are signalling the solidarity of those who persist, and expressing pride in themselves for "staying with it." One young woman said of leavers from her program, "They make me look better."

For practitioners with long experience in the youth field, these voices can serve as a reminder of fundamentals. For those just coming into the field, the variety, complexity and unpredictability of the young people's comments will help orient them to the challenges they must face. And for all of us involved in programs to reach and help youth, their words should inform and enrich, and help us to keep the human dimension prominent in our work.